

# Chronic Pain Patients Back Cannabis, Doctors Push Restrictions

## People Suffering from Chronic Pain Are More Supportive of Policies Expanding Cannabis Access Compared to Physicians

A recent study published in *JAMA Network Open* reveals a growing divide between chronic pain sufferers and the physicians who treat them when it comes to supporting policies that expand cannabis access. The research, led by Rutgers Health in collaboration with other institutions, surveyed over 1,600 individuals with chronic pain and more than 1,000 physicians in states where medical cannabis is legal. The findings highlight a significant difference in attitudes toward cannabis-related policies, particularly in the context of medical use and broader legalization efforts.

### Support for Federal Legalization of Cannabis Among Chronic Pain Sufferers

The study indicates that individuals suffering from chronic pain are overwhelmingly in favor of the federal legalization of cannabis for medical purposes. Of those surveyed, 70.8% expressed support for legalizing medical marijuana at the federal level. This is the most strongly supported policy change among chronic pain patients, reflecting a desire for national access to cannabis for medicinal use.

The survey also found that more than half of chronic pain sufferers (54.9%) support the federal legalization of cannabis for adult recreational use. This shows a significant level of support for broader cannabis reform beyond just medical applications, with patients increasingly advocating for greater freedom in how cannabis is accessed and used.

### Advocacy for Insurance Coverage and Low-Income Subsidies

The financial aspect of cannabis access is a crucial concern for many individuals living with chronic pain. According to the study, 64% of respondents would like to see insurance companies cover cannabis treatment for their condition. Given the often high out-of-pocket costs associated with medical cannabis, this level of support is not surprising. Patients see cannabis as a potentially less harmful alternative to other medications, including opioids, but affordability remains a significant barrier.

In addition, 50.1% of chronic pain sufferers expressed support for a policy that would require states with medical cannabis programs to provide subsidies for low-income individuals. This reflects a broader push for equity in cannabis access, ensuring that those in need, particularly from disadvantaged economic backgrounds, can afford treatment options that could alleviate their chronic pain.

### Physician Support Lags Behind, With Emphasis on Regulation

While the majority of physicians surveyed also support the federal legalization of medical cannabis, the percentage is notably lower than that of chronic pain sufferers. According to the study, 59% of physicians are

in favor of federal legalization for medical use. This indicates that although medical professionals are increasingly open to the idea of cannabis as a treatment option, there is still some reluctance compared to their patients.

Interestingly, the physicians surveyed showed a stronger preference for regulatory measures. The study found that 68.1% of doctors favored policies that require patient registration with a state medical cannabis program as a prerequisite for accessing cannabis treatments. In contrast, only 49.2% of chronic pain sufferers supported such requirements. This discrepancy suggests that while physicians may be warming to the idea of cannabis in medicine, they are more inclined to impose oversight and control, likely driven by concerns over proper patient management and safety.

## **The Complicated Cannabis Policy Landscape**

The complexity of cannabis legalization in the United States adds another layer to the differing views between patients and providers. Elizabeth Stone, a core faculty member at the Rutgers Institute for Health, Health Care Policy and Aging Research and the study's lead author, explained that the policy landscape for cannabis is uniquely convoluted.

“Depending on what state you’re in, it could be that medical cannabis is legal, it could be that medical and recreational use are legal, it could be that neither is legal, but some things are decriminalized,” said Stone, who also serves as an instructor in the Department of Psychiatry at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School.

Stone highlighted how this patchwork of state laws complicates access and leads to different levels of patient support for reform. “Overall, people with chronic pain were more supportive of the policies that would expand access to medical cannabis, and providers were more supportive of the policies that would restrict access to medical cannabis,” she noted.

## **Examining the Impact of Medical Cannabis Policies**

Stone's research is part of a broader initiative funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) that aims to examine the impact of state-level medical cannabis policies on opioid-related outcomes in chronic pain patients. With the opioid crisis continuing to be a major public health concern in the U.S., medical cannabis has been explored as a possible alternative or adjunct treatment that could reduce reliance on opioids.

The study's findings underscore the importance of understanding the role that cannabis can play in chronic pain management, particularly as patients and providers diverge in their views on access and regulation. For patients who experience chronic pain, cannabis is increasingly seen as a safer, more natural option compared to traditional prescription medications, particularly opioids. However, physicians appear to be more cautious, perhaps due to a lack of large-scale clinical trials and federal guidelines on cannabis use in medicine.

## **Navigating the Future of Cannabis in Chronic Pain Treatment**

As cannabis becomes more widely accepted both medically and recreationally across the United States, the tension between patient desires and physician concerns will likely continue. Chronic pain sufferers are at the forefront of pushing for expanded access, driven by their experiences and a desire for more options in managing their pain. Meanwhile, physicians are tasked with ensuring that any treatments offered are safe, effective, and administered under appropriate regulations.

The study suggests that ongoing dialogue between patients, healthcare providers, and policymakers is crucial in shaping future cannabis legislation. As research into the efficacy and safety of medical cannabis evolves, it may help bridge the gap in understanding between patients' lived experiences with chronic pain and physicians' need for evidence-based treatment guidelines.

In conclusion, chronic pain sufferers are more likely than physicians to support policies that expand access to medical cannabis, especially on a federal level. However, physicians lean toward maintaining regulatory controls to ensure responsible use. This difference in perspective reflects a larger debate about the role of cannabis in healthcare and its potential to alleviate chronic pain, while balancing concerns about safety and oversight.

Email: [info@cannabisriskmanager.com](mailto:info@cannabisriskmanager.com) | Phone: +415-226-4060

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